

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL**

**ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF LOWELL, MA:
MAKING, REMAKING, AND REMAKING AGAIN**

INFORMANT: SIDNEY LIANG [CAMBODIA]

INTERVIEWER: CHRISTOPH STROBEL

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S = SIDNEY

C = CHRISTOPH

Tape 08.21

S: My name is Sidney Liang. I am right now living in the Acre Area on Philips Street. I have been here since the late eighties, since late June or July of 1987. That is when I first arrived in the city of Lowell. I came to the United States in 1984, December of 1984. I arrived in New York City and lived in the Bronx for a year or two and afterwards moved to California. Basically a move where you need to find community members Cambodian community members who live in the US.... During that time there wasn't much and I am the oldest child. I have a sister that is six years younger than me. I have a mother who doesn't speak English. That is the major reason why we moved to California, a few years after we settled in the Bronx.

C: Did you move to Long Beach?

S: No. Actually I moved to Oakland, California.

C: Yes, there is a relatively strong Cambodian Community in Oakland too.

S: I guess Long Beach probably still is the largest Cambodian population. I lived in Oakland for about two years but I came to Lowell not to live. I came to Lowell for my cousins wedding. I came here and somehow didn't want to go back. The school is ok; it is not really in a big city where you have a lot of big buildings and you see a lot of people. But then you still can't communicate. Well, in New York I couldn't speak a lot of English so therefore my mom moved and I could see the frustration in her face that it is hard to go from one place to the next. You want to go shopping and to buy things and it is very difficult. So she moved there and after a year I came here. Then I asked her to come

here in 1987. So in between 1984 and 1986-87 we were in California and we know quite a bit about California. Then since then we have started our lives here. It is a long history. It wasn't about jobs or anything because we were almost like lost. We had no people or not many people to talk to. So we just kept going to school and I remember times when I was in New York that it was really hard to communicate and I think one of the stories stuck in my mind is when I sat on somebody's sunglasses and I broke them. I guess I was maybe fourteen years old and I was crying because the sunglasses cost five dollars. When we first came we had no money. Five dollars was a lot of money to us. So I cried. So one of my classmates offered to help and paid for the glasses. Life is a struggle itself for us when we came here because we were refugees when we came here. We just did what we could. The English, the food; there was not a lot of ethnic food that we had to consume. I started ninth grade in New York for a little bit. New York City prepares you for a lot. The Bronx especially.... I still remember to this day going to some school. My friend could not get out because there was a lot of gang fighting. They brought him back in and he was really bloody. The life here in Lowell was very difficult. I finished my school at Lowell High. In 1987 or 88 there were a lot of Cambodian as well. There was a lot of struggle between the people trying to adapt here. That is were you saw a lot of fighting on the street. Street fighting in the school, I have seen a lot of those during my days here at Lowell High School. We had a temple here that was starting up. That was a really good community when things started to flourish. There was not a lot of Cambodian Shops during that time. Today you have a lot more stores and shops and agencies, a lot of things that are really helpful. One of the reasons that I am doing a lot of work in communities is that I remember why my mom moved to Oakland. She was trying to get people to help me and one of the things that she was doing when I was in Oakland was that she was trying to get me transferred from one school to another that was closer to home. She actually went to see a Cambodian social worker. In Cambodian tradition the older folks do not sit on the floor. The guy that was doing the community service was sitting the way you are sitting and my mom was sitting on the floor actually kneeling. It clicked. I said "Why are you doing that?" You don't need to beg people to help if they are there to help you, then they will help you. You don't need to do that. We basically didn't get a lot of support from that person. [In Cambodia] we were farmers and basically we didn't have a lot of education. I worked second shift and went to Middlesex College during the day. [The event with the social worker] in Oakland California has pushed me to do a lot more.

C: Do you feel in a sense that you have a Cambodian Community like a functioning Cambodian life here in Lowell which you weren't able to have in the 1980s?

S: Yes. You have a bigger Cambodian Community but it is not a united community because the needs are very different and when we came here we tried to survive and survival meaning sticking together and helping each other. Today it is not about survival. People can survive and those who come here nowadays, they can get plane ticket to come here. Weather they sell their farms or what not. They can do that because they want to come here. We came here because we had no choice, because we got stuck between the Thai Camp and Cambodia. You go back and you have no land. Still during that time 79-80 you couldn't go back either because you would probably get shot. There is still a lot of stuff we need to work on. The community is growing but people are not growing with the

community. Some of it is understanding who we are, the American cultures and what is real and what is not real. Everything is almost like perception; the way you see things is what you get. That is why a lot of us get in trouble because we think what we are doing is ok because it is the norm because other people are doing it. But if you look at some of the things we do sometimes it is just because the other people are doing it. I think our community probably needs some more work. We have been here two or three decades but we are still working on it

C: What are some of the frictions that you are seeing in the community?

S: Sometimes it is not just friction; people do not understand each other. The people who came here during my time, the first wave of refugees, then when the new people came in, sometimes there is not a lot of appreciation for those people who came here first and build all this stuff. Instead of supporting each other we tend to do what most communities do. We tend to look at the negative piece instead of the positive things that need to be done. At the same time, they don't know what we have done. You know what, when we first came here English was the original language. I came here and had to eat apples all night long because there was no rice. Those folks who came here in the first wave during my time had no politics because Cambodia at the time was a disaster. There was nothing. You didn't belong to a party. So you came here with a clean slate. But the new folk they belong to A, B, C, or D party.

C: So are there fights going on in the political spectrum in Cambodia that are now occurring here?

S: There is a lot of different slots or pockets of politic affiliation. Folks seem to pay a lot of attention to what is happening at home and I think if you ask a lot of people they would say the same thing, that they pay attention to what is happening in Cambodia, the land issues, the culture and tradition because it is them. Even though they live here what is happening to them in Cambodia over there hurts them here. While politics play a large role in it, it only affects those older folks who still believe in the Cambodian political systems. The sandwich generation like me is in between. Then you look at the teens they have access to many things; you got the internet, the newspaper, the TV.... they are trying to get this information to the parents who are holding on to these politics.... So there is a lot of friction. How the kids here are trying to educate their parents. Their parents don't believe them because they are not Cambodian and they are not Americans but they have all this information. So that is one of the things I see a lot.

C: So it is really intergenerational issue but also tensions between people who have been here a longer time versus those who are just immigrating to the United States and then also different political spectrums that are playing themselves out. Have you been traveling outside of Lowell much? Have you been able to go back to Cambodia or Oakland or to the Bronx's?

S: I work for the health center. I do travel a lot. We just lost funding last year but I used to travel a couple times a year. We had conferences. It sometimes gives me a different

view of how America works. If you go to conferences, you come back you see how your community is in a circle or in a vacuum and you need to come out so that you can see your community. It is just that people don't get out much. I was fortunate enough in 1995 to go to Cambodia to work there for almost a year and maybe eight months or so. It was called CANDO; a Cambodian American National Development Organization. I worked there for a year plus. I saw how the system there works and how the system works here. You didn't see a lot of differences within the old folk because they operate almost the same way.... Nowadays people are richer, and they are spending a lot of money. Money coming in, I don't know how they earn the money. There is a lot of rich Cambodian living in the cities. But then if you go outside the city it is still the same thing. You see a lot of things that are not happening like hygiene, education. You see schools, you see temples and it is getting bigger and better. But maybe it is not growing fast enough in terms of spreading and sharing of knowledge and information from the city to the countryside. There is a lot of political infighting still because the ruling party has been there since the late 70's. They are still there now. They don't have a system like we do have here where the president gets a maximum of eight years and they change to another one. Who knows, things change and maybe one day things will change for the better. It gave me some perspective when I was in Cambodia and came back. There are a lot of needs out there. Sometimes even though there is a lot of fighting in Lowell, I just say that is nothing. There are a lot of things happening out there that are bigger than this. It helps traveling outside. I went to Long Beach for a couple of conferences. Long Beach, in my view, they are more business oriented, and here we are more services oriented in social sector or non-profit sector.

C: Are you married? Do you have children?

S: Yes. I got married when I was in Cambodia. I have two kids, eight and four, two girls. They go to regular school right now, Lowell Public Schools. It's one of those things where they teach you more than you teach them. That's how you grow. I keep learning everyday especially from my little one. She keeps telling me, well daddy, parents don't get mad. Kids are kids. They are not like me they have all the things: they want video games. They have TV and movies. When I was in Cambodia I was picking trash and one of my favorite things that I did was frog fishing. I am really good at that and somehow when you talk about frogs to them, they say "Daddy, you eat a frog, that's gross". I use that a lot to people that are really good in different cultures. Not really but it's a cultural thing. But the thing is they have it. The kids here don't realize it sometimes because they never struggled the way we did. All we eat was a little water here and a little water there, not real food. Down here they eat a lot of stuff. You go to a restaurant and there is food left over. We never had that. It's one of those things that I get my kids to understand some of the things of where I come from. Actually I took my oldest one to Cambodia when she was two. She had fun and at least she understands. The little one is different she wants to go to China. She wants to see the great wall and not Cambodia. They do learn a lot. They speak both languages. One of the things also is even though that a lot of folks died in Cambodia [during the Khmer Rouge] especially those who are doctors or teachers.... Give us maybe another ten or twenty years and we are going to have these people back with new knowledge and information, because it is very hard to understand

and see. People [in mainstream society] ask How come you don't get it? How come you don't understand because you don't know the system? You want us to understand people who live in the city and we come from the countryside where we don't have even toiletry. Sometimes it's really hard for people who don't understand that. Just maybe give us a little more and we can do it. But at the same time we ask for those who have new knowledge, more experience, and more education to have patience.

C: Do you have a lot of relatives in Cambodia or does your wife?

S: My wife has family over there. I only have my uncle over there. But it is kind of hard to say when you live in a village everybody is your family. When I walk there, people know me and call my name. But I still don't remember a lot of them. My uncle is almost like a priest. He works in a temple and he is all I have left. My wife, actually my mother-in-law is still in Cambodia. My wife just came back from visiting over there. She still has a lot of family there. Today, Cambodia and Lowell are pretty close. Sometimes too close – it is scary. I guess a lot of folks try to visit Cambodia once a year or every two or three years. But it is much easier for people to go to Cambodia now than before. There are still a lot of things that are not stable in Cambodia. The government is fine but when you are poor here and you are looking to go to your family over there. They are poor too. Therefore it is really hard and sometimes they think that over here in the United States we have a lot of money.

C: Is there an expectation from folks in Cambodia that relatives in the US should give money?

S: Yes, they think we have a lot of money. We don't and most of us don't have money. We don't have a lot. We work sometimes on an hourly rate and we don't have the money to send over there. Cambodia we have a lot of people there that are poor but they have a home; here you have to be here thirty years to own a house. Otherwise you are renting.

C: Even then you need a down payment and all these other things, taxes, etc. etc.

S: Again in the old days you didn't understand all this. You came from the country side when all you needed to do is to go with your mom and pop to a rice field. Now you are right in the middle of the city. How do you learn to negotiate buying a house? There are a lot of expectations from folks: "Why are you guys so slow."

C: Can I ask you a follow-up question? Since you mentioned your kids, you make an effort of teaching them Khmer. Are there other ways that you are trying to preserve Cambodian culture? Is that important to you?

S: Well basically it is all I have. I don't know what is going to happen to Cambodia.... I have to preserve that culture for my kids. Some of the things I do is we never miss ceremonies or events or some of the traditional things we do. They do have their Cambodian clothes which they wear once in a while. They do have the Cambodian New Year that they celebrate. My mom is still around and speaks Cambodian at home and

does what she needs to do. My kids are exposed to that at home and just regular rice at home and we cook regular Cambodian foods. So some of the things we do is to take them to the temple when something is going on. We watch movies or dances. It is kind of hard to see them.... You know when you speak English you have an accent? When they speak Khmer it's like an American speaking Cambodian and I am like what this is my kid and she is Cambodian.

C: Language is important and that is a great skill to have. Do you consider yourself Cambodian, Cambodian American or American?

S: I know I am an American. Personally, it didn't click with me until I went to Cambodia. The thing is I can't answer your question because I don't know who I am. Reason is my mom went to Cambodia and she was with me and was showing me. She said, "See that tree over there; when I was young I use to climb that tree and go to the market, I used to do this and I used to do that". Now, when it was my turn, I went to Cambodia, for the first year I did not go to my home town. I have no recollection or remember where I was born. I know I was born somewhere in Cambodia but I don't know. I don't have any memories like this is where my house was. I remember a lot of the Thai border and the camps – I lived there for six or seven years. Now I am here. I am not an American either. It is almost like I am floating from one place to the next. I feel comfortable but I am not at peace to say Cambodia is my home or the US is my home. It is really hard to actually know where you are. I don't think I can answer until one day I can say that this is who I am or this is what I am.

C: And you are the only person who can answer that. Do you like the phrase Cambodian American or does that not work? And I am not trying to impose something on you.

S: Personally for me it is just an illusion. It is not real. I can say I am a Cambodian American because I was naturalized and my daughter is born here and she is an American just like anybody else. But is she? She can say she is an American. But [then] somebody else can say you are not, your Cambodian. I guess it goes back to who that person you are dealing with is. No matter what ... I am going to be Cambodian. I doesn't matter where I physically live or where I go. I am Cambodian. I am here legally, I am naturalized citizen. I am an American. Yet, the inner self of me is saying I am Cambodian. I can eat American food and I can adapt. You can't get Cambodian out of me. You can put a lot of stuff in me but I don't think you can get the Cambodian out of me; just like you can't get American out of someone else, same thing with my kids. They can justify it by saying I am born here. I can speak the language and it is my home. So I am American. But she has to believe that. If she doesn't believe that she is going to be Cambodian. She is going to be what ever she wants to be. I know that doesn't answer your question.

C: I really don't think there is an answer to my question. It is an open ended question because it tells me more about you and what it means to be Sydney and what it means to be an immigrant in this city and what you go through. You're the one that can provide this answer. No one can make you. Do you think maybe you are just a traveler in two

different worlds? Like you are traveling in the American world and you are traveling in the Cambodian world but you are really not rooted in either?

S: There is no peace. You almost feel tired. You can say because of your travels you are tired. You are traveling in between. Even when you go to sleep your mind dreams you are in Cambodia and your heart is in Cambodia and your heart is here. You are always traveling. Therefore you cannot find this little piece in yourself.... This is not just happening now. It happened when my country went caput. It got all messed up and sent people all over the world. I guess most people feel the same way somewhat. For the old folks they are luckier because they remember when they go back to Cambodia, they know where they are from, they are born here, my folks, my land. I don't have a land. I don't have a land physically in the US. It's almost like you said we are travelers and we go from one place to the next even though you are in one place you are still traveling because your mind and heart remembers all the things. You are never rested in one place.

C: Do you consider Lowell and the Cambodian community in Lowell a home? Or do you have problems with that too?

S: I know Lowell. When I get off the plane I feel like I am at home because this is where I am and this is where I am going to try and make it. I can say yes it is my home; I live here but it is the inner self and who are you and where you want to go. I know I don't have that answer. In today's time I live in Lowell and basically my home is here and that is probably how I am going to pursue things until whatever time comes. Yes, Lowell is my home and the people in the community here are my community and I think that people is too me is more secondary is because I feel if you chose the two, this one is more of a home than the one over there. My friends are here, everybody is here. When I get over there I am just another tourist walking around in Cambodia. The only thing is I can speak the language and that's it. But I come here and I feel more comfortable because I have friends and family here. This is more of a home and I guess it will be for a long time.

C: Let's shift to power and politics in the city of Lowell. Do you feel that the newer immigrants have a political voice in town? Or do you think not so? Are you registered to vote? And did you vote in the last election?

S: I vote every year. That is what I want to do. It is very difficult. I don't like the way everything is set up in the city of Lowell. If you look at the city council, there are no term limits; if there are I don't know about it. Now let's say you sit in the city council for ten terms, twenty years; by the end of the twenty years you are sixty-five but by then maybe you are going to have kids who are interested in running. Since you have been there for so long then your kid is probably going to have a chance to sit there rather than me and my kids. It doesn't matter how hard they work. I know the city council works very hard and that is not the issue. The issue is that you have been here for so long and you want your friends or children to take that role that you are taking. I doubt that we are going to have a Cambodian Mayor or another minority mayor in the city of Lowell any time soon.

Some of the people that have been sitting there for so long, they don't have to run. They just put their name there and they don't have to do anything.

C: Would you like to see Cambodian City Councilors'?

S: Yes, I do. The reason I say yes is because we are almost one-third of the city and we should have some kind of representation. You can't have a bunch of kids running around with no teachers. You talk about trying to do more in the city; you need someone in there first to do anything. For people who come down to your community for the votes, that's just another story just for a vote. I think that the new kids can have a much better chance to go in there. I still think in a couple of years we might see one or two, who knows. Still it is not going to be a majority in there because the majority is those folks who have been there for a while and they don't want to go. Until we say, five terms is enough, that's more than ten years. You have the same job for ten years. I don't know; how much more improvements you can do. .

C: From talking to other people and other immigrants in the city it is not that different. So you went to the public schools in Lowell and Middlesex Community College. Is there any other institutions?

S: Yes, I came to Umass Lowell for a while. This is where I flunked so bad and then went to Cambodia. It is hard because you go to school and go to work and you are not a family where you have a big brother or a big sister to help you out and you are on your own most of the time and most kids go through the same thing. You are trying to do it on your own and you don't have a lot of support systems. Yes, there are a lot of flyers and people who offer tutors but you have to go to them. There is a reason you flunk class....You go post a flyer up in the library for tutor in math, not a lot of folks are going to come. Unless someone takes them there and tells them to sit there with John.... A flyer is almost nothing unless you take them there and show them how to do it. I don't see a lot of that happening. I went to Franklin Pierce. It was a good college. It is nice out there. I did my night classes there until 10 or 11 o'clock at night. I just finished at Suffolk. I went to Suffolk for the last year or so, I will finish next month. I am done for awhile. I am still waiting for my diploma.

C: I notice with a lot of immigrant students that I have and I have one hundred and fifteen students total per semester. So I have over two hundred and thirty students per year. I try to give a lot of help but there is only so much time in a day. I can see that it is a really big issue that institutions need to do a better job addressing, whether it is at high schools or at universities. Do you feel that at Franklin Pierce that was different maybe because the class sizes were smaller or were you more mature at that point?

S: I guess it was more comfortable in a way. I came here and you have to approach the teacher but at the same time when I was at Franklin Pierce you go in and say hello and the teacher, he is talking to you not like a teacher. In our culture teachers are very different and you can't be friends with teachers.... At Suffolk you go over there and they talk to you and you don't do the homework right they give you another chance...."This is

wrong, go back and do it again.” We come here and we want to learn but you can tell right away who is actually going to teach you and who is not going to teach you. I can see it and I have seen teachers that don’t say anything. I think that if you make your student feel comfortable, like ask questions they will be more honest with you and you will get more out of them.

C: What are your aspirations and dreams for your future and your families future?

S: My goal is to have my kids, is everything I wanted. I want them to really learn how to use and keep their culture. One of the things I want to do is preserve the culture. I think we need to not be afraid of things around us. Everyday to me is a fight because we see too much negativity. Maybe ten or twenty years from now, maybe we stop seeing everything so negative and look at the positive and beautiful side of people. It doesn’t matter if that person is Cambodian or not. You can’t keep blaming people who don’t know things. I hope that in the future we stop blaming each other. In order to move on you need to just let go. If you don’t let go of the dislikes against each other you can’t go anywhere. I don’t like politics, but maybe if you don’t like something you must get closer to it so you can understand it. I will stick around to give whatever I have to my kids and maybe they can make a better future for Cambodian people.

C: Thanks for talking with us and good luck to you.